

Public issues and priorities for churches

Churches and public issues

The 2011 National Church Life Survey (NCLS) revealed that almost all church attenders thought that churches and Christians should be involved in advocacy and comment in relation to public policy issues.¹ So what are the priority public issues that they believe their own denominations should focus on?

A sample of Catholic, Anglican and Protestant attenders were asked the following question as part of the 2011 NCLS:

On which of the following public issues do you think your church denomination should be most active (Mark up to FOUR options)

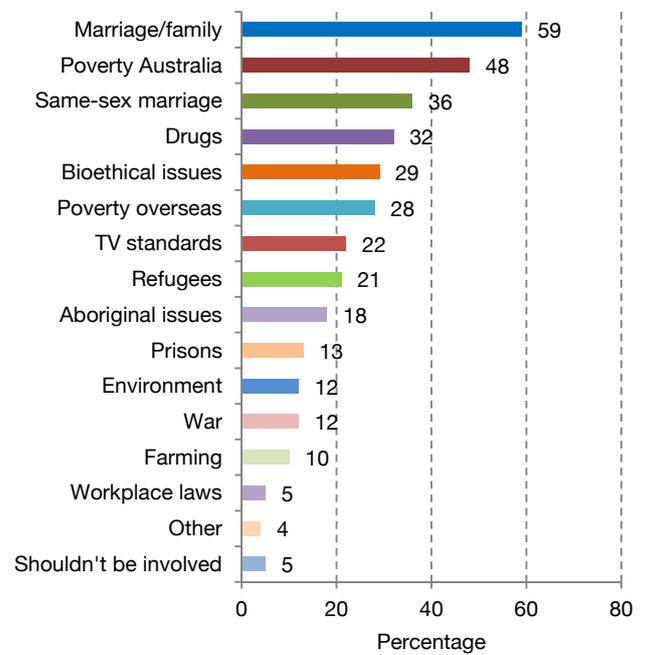
- Aboriginal issues
- Asylum seekers/refugees
- Bioethical issues (e.g. abortion, euthanasia, cloning)
- Drugs/substance abuse
- Environmental issues
- Farming issues
- Opposition to same-sex 'marriage'
- Poverty and disadvantage in Australia
- Poverty overseas
- Prisons and the criminal justice system
- Standards in TV, film and literature
- Support for marriage and the family
- War and conflict overseas
- Workplace conditions and laws
- Another issue not listed here
- The church should not be involved in public policy issues

Overall responses

Church attenders were most likely to select marriage and the family (59%) as a public issue on which they wanted their church denomination to be most active. Poverty in Australia (48%) was the second most popular choice as a priority for action by their denominations. The least popular issue was workplace laws and conditions (selected by 5% of attenders).

¹ Pepper, M., Bevis, S., Powell, R., & Hancock, N. (2013) Involvement by churches in public policy: NCLS Fact Sheet 13002. NCLS Research, Australian Catholic University, Sydney.

Figure 1: Public issues and priorities for churches



Source: 2011 NCLS Attender Sample Survey 0 (n=1,301).

Demographic differences

The priorities of 8 of the 14 named issues differed significantly between age groups. Popularity increased with age for aboriginal issues, farming issues, and standards in TV/film/literature. Poverty overseas was a higher priority among 15 to 29 year olds than among other age groups, but the reverse was true in the case of poverty in Australia. Support for marriage/families and bioethical issues were least popular among the 70+ age group (compared to other age groups) and 50-69 year olds were the age group least likely to choose drugs/substance abuse.

Views about priority issues differed little by gender. However, the priority of several issues increased with educational attainment, namely environmental issues, asylum seekers/refugees, poverty overseas and standards in TV/film/literature. The reverse was true for drugs/substance abuse, same-sex marriage, and farming issues.

Table 1: Public issue priorities by age and education

| Issue | Age | | | | Education | | |
|---------------------|------------|-------|-------|-----|-----------|------------|--------|
| | 15-29 | 30-49 | 50-69 | 70+ | School | Trade cert | Degree |
| | Percentage | | | | | | |
| Aboriginal issues | 8 | 14 | 21 | 23 | 19 | 16 | 18 |
| Bioethical issues | 28 | 34 | 30 | 23 | 28 | 26 | 33 |
| Drugs | 34 | 39 | 28 | 21 | 36 | 31 | 30 |
| Environment | 9 | 11 | 13 | 11 | 8 | 11 | 16 |
| Farming | 5 | 6 | 13 | 13 | 12 | 11 | 7 |
| Marriage/family | 60 | 65 | 57 | 54 | 55 | 64 | 60 |
| Poverty Australia | 39 | 49 | 52 | 49 | 46 | 50 | 50 |
| Poverty overseas | 40 | 26 | 25 | 27 | 24 | 28 | 32 |
| Prisons | 13 | 13 | 14 | 11 | 13 | 12 | 13 |
| Refugees | 18 | 19 | 23 | 24 | 16 | 20 | 28 |
| Same-sex marriage | 33 | 34 | 35 | 41 | 42 | 38 | 26 |
| TV standards | 13 | 14 | 22 | 35 | 24 | 28 | 16 |
| War | 10 | 13 | 11 | 14 | 10 | 12 | 14 |
| Workplace laws | 4 | 6 | 6 | 6 | 5 | 5 | 6 |
| Other issue | 8 | 4 | 5 | 2 | 5 | 3 | 4 |
| Shouldn't be active | 2 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 4 | 2 | 7 |

Source: 2011 NCLS Attender Sample Survey O (n=1,282).

Denominational differences

Denominations did not differ significantly in views about whether or not the church should be involved in public policy issues as a whole. However, attenders in different denominations gave differing weight to the prioritization of public issues. There were significant differences by denomination for all named public policy issues except for poverty in Australia, prisons, and workplace conditions.

Table 2: Public issue priorities by denomination

| Issue | Anglican | Baptist/Churches of Christ | Catholic | Lutheran | Pentecostal | Uniting | Other Protestant |
|---------------------|------------|----------------------------|----------|----------|-------------|---------|------------------|
| | Percentage | | | | | | |
| Aboriginal issues | 18 | 15 | 20 | 16 | 10 | 33 | 12 |
| Bioethical issues | 21 | 28 | 32 | 42 | 32 | 13 | 28 |
| Drugs | 27 | 30 | 31 | 22 | 40 | 31 | 43 |
| Environment | 12 | 11 | 12 | 6 | 6 | 22 | 10 |
| Farming | 8 | 6 | 11 | 24 | 6 | 17 | 7 |
| Marriage/family | 63 | 70 | 56 | 65 | 66 | 46 | 55 |
| Poverty Australia | 56 | 43 | 48 | 46 | 47 | 55 | 39 |
| Poverty overseas | 42 | 34 | 24 | 20 | 29 | 22 | 25 |
| Prisons | 12 | 13 | 13 | 6 | 11 | 16 | 17 |
| Refugees | 25 | 18 | 22 | 14 | 11 | 35 | 24 |
| Same-sex marriage | 29 | 45 | 35 | 38 | 44 | 25 | 35 |
| TV standards | 31 | 30 | 19 | 24 | 15 | 19 | 34 |
| War | 14 | 5 | 14 | 6 | 6 | 16 | 12 |
| Workplace laws | 4 | 4 | 7 | 6 | 5 | 8 | 0 |
| Other issue | 5 | 3 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 1 | 6 |
| Shouldn't be active | 3 | 4 | 6 | 1 | 3 | 7 | 5 |

Source: 2011 NCLS Attender Sample Survey O (n=1,301).

When the issues were ranked in terms of importance within each of the denominations (with a higher rank indicating higher importance), the ranking pattern for

the Uniting Church differed the most from the ranking across all attenders. Refugees, aboriginal issues, environmental issues and farming issues exhibited much higher rankings for Uniting Church attenders than for all attenders (and bioethical issues and opposition to same sex marriage displayed much lower rankings in the Uniting Church). Farming issues also exhibited a much higher ranking for Lutherans than for church attenders as a whole.

Differences by attendance rate

There were some differences observed in views by frequency of attendance. Increasing church attendance was related to a greater popularity of bioethical issues (15% of people attending less than monthly, 24% of people attending at least monthly, and 30% of people attending weekly or more often) and opposition to same-sex marriage (10%, 24% and 38% for the three attendance levels respectively).

Summary

The vast majority of Australian church attenders were of the view that their denomination should be involved in public policy issues. When it came to which sets of issues denominations should be active on, with the exception of poverty in Australia, the most popular issues tended to be socially conservative ones (such as marriage and the family and same-sex marriage). In contrast, the least popular issues were those that have tended to be the domain of progressive social voices – such as workplace laws, war and the environment.

References

Powell, R., (2011) [computer file], 2011 NCLS Attender Sample Survey O, NCLS Research, Sydney.

Citation

Pepper, M., Bevis, S., Powell, R. & Hancock, N. (2013) Public issues and priorities for churches, NCLS Research Fact Sheet 13004. Adelaide: Mirrabooka Press

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About NCLS: The National Church Life Survey (NCLS) is a quantitative survey of 260,000-450,000 church attenders, 6,000-10,000 church leaders and 3,000-7,000 churches in more than 20 Australian denominations every census year since 1991.